

# A pipeline to college: Program prepares St. Cloud-area students of color

BY DAVID UNZE • APRIL 22, 2008

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For 20 years, Robert Johnson's "pipeline programs" at St. Cloud State University have helped hundreds of students of color realize college as a viable option after high school and has helped them prepare for it.

A recent grant from the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system will allow Johnson to expand that pipeline and establish a presence within St. Cloud school district to reach more children and stay connected more frequently and consistently.

The \$2.2 million grant will be used to target 600 students of color for services such as academic counseling, tutoring and mentoring, cultural enrichment and financial aid and college admissions preparation.

While Johnson's summer camps have brought numerous students of color to campus for a week

or several weeks of on-campus living, classwork and exploration, the MnSCU grant will bring help into the St. Cloud secondary schools.

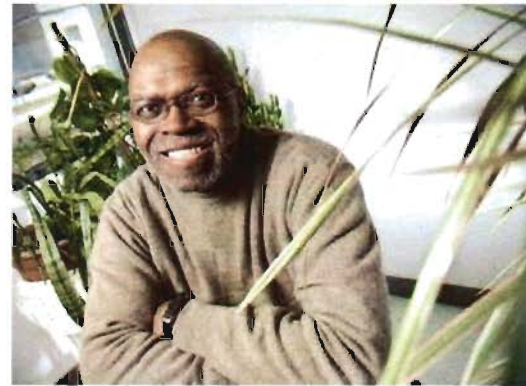
"We want to identify 600 students in grade 8-12 and give them an array of services, programs and activities that will support them in completing secondary school and going on to post-secondary education," Johnson said. "These new services and programs would build upon, interact with, be supportive of and complementary to the existing resources."

Eight academic advising teams and academic advisers will be in the schools, working with 16 teacher-consultants from the school district on various subjects. Johnson, a St. Cloud State professor and chair of the Department of Ethnic Studies, hopes to have a number of college students working as mentors and tutors in conjunction with the academic advising teams to provide the students with help "on homework, companionship or just being mentors in the sense of giving them peer guidance," he said.

The MnSCU grant will create the Access and Opportunity Center, which "enables us to put more human capital directly at the disposal of these students," Johnson said.

The St. Cloud Access and Opportunity Center is a partnership among St. Cloud State, St. Cloud Technical College and the St. Cloud school district. It addresses needs revealed in test scores, graduation rates and achievement disparities, Johnson said. His grant proposal cites statistics about the school district:

Of the more than 4,000 students in the St. Cloud school district, 22 percent in grades K-12 are students of color, and 19 percent in grades 8-12 are students of color. The number of English-language learners has increased from 320 in 2000-01 to 914 in 2006-07, an increase of 186 percent.



Times photo by Paul Middlestaedt, [pmiddlestaedt@stcloudtimes.com](mailto:pmiddlestaedt@stcloudtimes.com) Robert Johnson, a St. Cloud State University professor and chair of the Department of Ethnic Studies, has helped hundreds of students turn college dreams into reality. Now a \$2.2 million grant will help him work with 600 students of color in the St. Cloud school district.

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Graduation rates for white students are 20 percent higher than for their African/African-American counterparts; 15 percent higher than Chicano/Latino(a) students and 6 percent higher than Asian students.

Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment test data from 2006-07 shows twice as many eighth-grade students of color failed to meet the state standards for math as white students. For 11th-grade students, 82 percent of students of color didn't meet the state standards and 49 percent of whites failed to meet the standards.

During the same academic year, 33 percent of 11th-grade students of color failed to meet the state math standards while 13 percent of white students failed to meet the math standards.

There remains a 20 percent gap between the graduation rates of whites and African/African-American students. Whites graduate at a 15 percent higher rate than Chicano/Latino(a) students and 6 percent higher rate than Asian students.

The ethnic breakdown of students who took Advanced Placement classes in 2006-07: American Indian, 4 percent; Asian, 46 percent; African and African-American, 2 percent; Chicano/Latino(a), 11 percent, and white, 23 percent.

The grant will provide help like the kind Dennis Luke received in 2004, when he attended the Scientific Discovery Program. At the time, Luke knew he wanted to attend college, he said, but he didn't know what he wanted to study or where.

"Attending the camp was a great experience for me personally, because it gave me an idea of how college is going to be like. It was such a fun learning experience that when we are recruiting children to the camps, I like to refer to it as a 'funducational' camp because you get to have so much fun and learn at the same time. Not only that but you also get to make lifetime friends."

After attending the camp, he knew he wanted to explore science as an area of study.

"When I got accepted to Minnesota State University-Mankato and St. Cloud State, I chose to attend SCSU because I was already familiar with the campus."

Luke is in his third year at St. Cloud State, is majoring in biochemistry and hopes to become a pharmacist.

Kyle Walton attended an academic camp in the early 1990s when he was in middle school. Education was stressed in his family, and he knew the importance of preparing for and attending college. The camp exposed him for the first time to the challenges of balancing academic work with free time and provided him a chance to compete and compare himself against and collaborate with other talented students of color.

"There's a lot of other bright kids out there, and it really put the fire under me to not be complacent," said Walton, who lives in the Los Angeles area and manages a \$75 million tax credit equity fund that promotes responsible investing in low- and moderate-income communities. "It was one of the first times I was in an academic program where there was clearly an abundance of fellow great minds."

Johnson hopes the grant will lead to more students of color attending college. "The idea is to go to school. Go somewhere," Johnson said. "If you come to St. Cloud State University, that's great. If not and you go somewhere else, that's great. And if you finish, that's even better."